

A NATIVE TERRESTRIAL ORCHID, PLATANThERA BLEPHARIGLOTTIS
THE WHITE FRINGED ORCHID

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When orchids are mentioned, most people think of the epiphytic type which grow naturally in trees. Florida has some of these. Florida also has terrestrial orchids which grow in the soil. Platanthera blephariglottis (Willd.) Lindl., the white fringed orchid, is a spectacular example of a native terrestrial orchid. It grows in wet soils of grass lands, margins of woods, and occasionally roadsides where mowing is infrequent.

SYNONYMY: Platanthera blephariglottis is represented in Florida by variety conspicua (Nash) Luer (2,3). Some of the names used in various literature for this plant are: Habenaria conspicua Nash, Blephariglottis conspicua (Nash) Small, and Habenaria blephariglottis (Willd.) Hook. var. conspicua (Nash) Ames. Many authors in the past have lumped Platanthera together with Habenaria under the genus Habenaria, in which case Habenaria blephariglottis with or without the varietal designation would be the correct name. Current practice is generally to separate P. blephariglottis and its close relatives (around 250 species) from Habenaria (around 750 species) and place them in the genus Platanthera.



Fig.1. Inflorescences of Platanthera blephariglottis var. conspicua found growing along a roadside in North Florida. (DPI Photo #850039-9)

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DESCRIPTION: Platanthera blephariglottis var. conspicua (Fig. 1): Plant perennial, erect, leafy, 0.5-1m tall; roots numerous, fleshy; rhizomes short or none; leaves 2-4, glossy green, lanceolate, keeled, 5-35 cm long, 1-5 cm wide, sheathing the stem below, bracteate above; inflorescence a terminal raceme, densely to loosely many-flowered with 30-50 flowers; floral bracts green, lanceolate 20x3 mm; flowers white, around 2 cm wide; sepals ovate, acute, dorsal concave, laterals oblique, 8-11x5-9 mm; petals linear, apex fringed, 5-8x1.5-3 mm; lip ovate, about 1 cm long, margin copiously fringed, fringe up to 1 cm long; spur basal, slender, 3-4 cm long; column 3x3 mm, anther cells 2, opposite, pollinia 2, stalked, yellow; ovary pedicellate, slender, greenish to pale orange, about 25 mm long; capsule ascending, ellipsoid, 20x40 mm.

DISCUSSION: Two varieties of P. blephariglottis exist in the U.S. One, P. blephariglottis var. blephariglottis, grows from the Great Lakes eastward in the northeastern U.S. and southern Canada. The other, P. blephariglottis var. conspicua grows farther south from New Jersey along the Atlantic Coast to Central Florida and west along the Gulf Coast to Texas (3). Plants of the southern population, var. conspicua are larger, more robust, and with larger spikes of larger and more numerous flowers. This species has a wide range but seldom is abundant anywhere.

Herbarium specimens of P. blephariglottis var. conspicua are difficult to distinguish from those of P. ciliaris, since both lose their color in drying and since color is the most obvious difference. Fresh material is readily distinguished by flower color with P. blephariglottis having white flowers and P. ciliaris having orange-yellow flowers. There are other technical characters of flower structure which can be used to separate dry material, such as size and shape of various flower parts (4,5).

Plants of P. blephariglottis as well as most other species of this genus are very exacting in their habitat requirements. For that reason, it is impractical to attempt to transplant or cultivate them. Everett (1) states "Only if the exacting conditions of soil and other environmental factors under which they grow in the wild are closely duplicated is there even the slightest chance of success...but even that is far from certain." Persons should not attempt to transplant or grow these plants, since to do so is to condemn the plants to death. The only way to continue to enjoy these beautiful native orchids is to preserve the habitat in which they grow.

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